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## Fuck the Canon (or, How Do You Solve a Problem Like von Trier?): Teaching, Screening, and Writing About Cinema in the Age of #MeToo

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# FUCK THE CANON (OR, HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE VON TRIER?): TEACHING, SCREENING AND WRITING ABOUT CINEMA IN THE AGE OF #METOO

by: Rebecca Harrison , November 9, 2018

Harvey Weinstein. Bob Weinstein. Dustin Hoffman. Bernardo Bertolucci.

On September 16, 2018, Melissa Thompson shared a video of film producer Harvey Weinstein sexually harassing her during a business pitch. Thompson was raped by Weinstein following the meeting. I suppose I should say that Thompson *alleges* that she was raped by Weinstein. But I will not watch the video, and I do not say alleged, because I believe her.

Melissa Thompson's interview provides new details about her experience, but it is not news. And it should not be necessary. Yet almost a year since the Weinstein revelations first broke in the *New York Times* on October 10, 2017, and Tarana Burke's #MeToo movement went viral five days later, a woman still feels the need to prove their rape by sharing evidence with the public. It is a reminder that as a society, we have failed to truly believe survivors.

It is also a reminder that #MeToo is not a phenomenon that happened in the abstract. 'Me' is a person, and they have a name and voice. Melissa Thompson is a rape survivor, and her comments make clear why I'm so sick and so tired of hearing people say that we're living in the post-#MeToo, post-Weinstein age. Because #MeToo isn't over, and Weinstein hasn't yet faced justice in court (in fact, he continues to deny wrong-doing). All the time that survivors continue to carry the burden of their experiences with them, all the time that the films made by Weinstein and other abusers continue to be screened, we are not 'post' anything. This is our present, and it is messy and difficult.

Alfred Hitchcock. Louis CK. Fatty Arbuckle. Richard Dreyfuss.

I am writing this and speaking to you as a film critic. I am writing this and speaking to you as a film scholar. As a teacher. As someone who has loved going to the movies and been invested in the joy of cinema since they were a child. And I'm also writing this and speaking to you as a survivor of rape and multiple instances of male sexual violence.

For a long time, I've tried to keep my personal and professional identities separate, to make a case for championing women's filmmaking and holding abusive men to account using reason, logic, and the language of patriarchy, which insists that I can't have feelings and also speak truth. Well I'm done with that. Back in May, I watched as scores of film critics threw their so-called ethics out the window and flocked to see the new Lars von Trier film while we were at Cannes. I listened to stories about how Cannes festival director Thierry Frémaux made sexist jokes at the 50/50 by 2020 pledge signing. And I failed to get excited by pictures of Weinstein in handcuffs as he continued to say, 'not guilty'. We need to stop validating these men and their films and their 'jokes', and we need to stop now.

This is my solution to the problem of abusive men in the film industry: imperfect, personal, professional, emotional, logical, irrational... and angry. Yes, this article is angry, because this article is me, and I am fucking furious.

It may seem unorthodox for an academic and a woman to be so viscerally emotive. I know I'm meant to be calm and considered, to play the game according to the rules determined for me by men. But I'm not going to do any of those things. Instead, I'm going to ask you to pay me attention. To notice me – yes, me – so that you look beyond the headlines and see what your love for Alfred Hitchcock or Roman Polanski or Woody Allen looks like from the other side. I'm going to say fuck them and fuck their canon.

I'm not going to give you scholarly references and a high-concept argument obscured by theory and some faux-philosophy. I'm not giving you a polemical one-size-fits-all-solution to the problem of abusive men (there are other approaches and possibilities, after all). I'm just going to tell you how you can do things differently. I'm just going to ask you...

Ben Affleck. Casey Affleck. Kevin Spacey. Roman Polanski.

...to believe me.

Some background.

Last summer, I was tasked with teaching a second-year undergraduate course to film and television students. In my experience, historical surveys (including on modules I have delivered in the past) have all tended to look the same. All of the films and television shows will be directed by white men. All of them. Of the readings, only a handful will be by women scholars. There will be no people of colour represented. At all. This time, I decided to do things differently and ensured that feminist and postcolonial perspectives were prominent. I envisaged that the course would include a mix of men and women on the screening list. Then, the #MeToo movement went viral in October 2017...

Chuck Close. Michael Fassbender. Darryl Zanuck. Gary Oldman.

...and, like many other women, I felt sick and enraged and upset and exhausted by the relentless outpouring of stories about men's abuses of women in the industries that we work in and study. Also, like many other women, I felt sick and enraged and upset and exhausted because this was about me, too, as a survivor of male sexual violence. To teach Arbuckle is to teach Hitchcock is to teach Weinstein is, to me, to validate my own abusers in the classroom. What to do about it, then? Well, by chance, I learned that Anna Backman Rogers, who works at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, was only screening films directed by women in her classroom because she couldn't trust that male filmmakers hadn't built their careers on exploitation. She didn't mention her decision or political views to her students but just got on with teaching women-centred film.

Bill Murray. Nicholas Cage. Sean Penn. Luc Besson.

Sometimes the simplest solutions are the most radical. Burn it all down. Don't teach or screen films directed by men in your classrooms (or at your festivals or in your cinemas, perhaps). No, of course, not all men. But we're sticking two fingers up to the patriarchy here, so attempting to second-guess which of our esteemed auteurs didn't harass or assault women on sets, at festivals, or in hotel rooms is, in academic parlance 'beyond the scope of this paper'.

This is about saying we won't take it anymore. We see you, the abusers, and we see you, the survivors, and we're going to set fire to it all to change things and make things better.

Consequently, I decided to teach a mandatory film and television history course that only screened film and TV by women. And this is the curriculum, which was co-designed and co-taught by a colleague:

#### **BLOCK 1: Doing History – Stuff, Objects, Things**

##### **Introduction – 'A New Hope' for Film and Television Histories**

*Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977, USA, editor Marcia Lucas; scriptwriter [Gloria Katz](#); hair stylist Patricia McDermott)  
*Catastrophe: series 3 episode 6* (2017, UK, writer and creator Sharon Horgan)

##### **Archives and Early Filmmakers**

*The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926, Germany, dir. Lotte Reiniger)

##### **Inside the Cinema – Objects, Architecture and Labour in WW2**

*Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940, USA, dir. Dorothy Arzner)

##### **Reception – Film Criticism and Cinema Memories**

*Cleo from 5 to 7* (1952, France, dir. Agnes Varda)

##### **Stars as Texts – Riz Ahmed, Race and Masculinity**

*The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012, USA/India, dir. Mira Nair)  
*Girls: Season 6 Episode 1* (2017, USA, dir. Lena Dunham)  
*Boys* (2017, USA, dir. Charli XCX and Sarah McColgan)

#### **BLOCK 2: Aesthetics, Genre, Ideology**

##### **LGBT Narratives in Film & Television**

*Oranges are not the Only Fruit: Episodes 1-3* (1990, BBC, UK, dir. Beeban Kidran)  
*Sense8: Season 2 Episode 2 "Who Am I?"* (2017, Netflix, USA, dir. Lana Wachowski)

##### **Documentary, Race and the Politics of Digital Distribution**

*13th* (2016, USA, Netflix, dir. Ava DuVernay)  
*13th: A Conversation with Oprah Winfrey and Ava DuVernay* (2017, USA, Netflix)

##### **Gender and Race in British Heritage Film**

*Belle* (2013, UK, dir. Amma Asante)

##### **Children's Film and Television in the German Democratic Republic**

*The Blue Light (Das Blaue Licht)* (1976, GDR, dir. Iris Gusner)  
*Animation Before Unification: 16 Shorts from East Germany* (1975, GDR, DEFA Animation Nr. 1, dir. Ohne Worte)

##### **Experimental Film: Aesthetics and the Politics of Culture**

*Reassemblage* (1982, Vietnam, dir. Trinh T Minh-ha)  
*Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977, UK, dir. Laura Mulvey)

You'll notice there's a slight cheat in week one: I taught *Star Wars*. I had two reasons for doing so. First, to reassure students that yes, I write about and enjoy things directed by men and that we can simultaneously critique them. Second, to get students to look beyond the 'auteur' and consider the hidden labour of women in seemingly male-dominated projects. Otherwise, everything had a woman director.

Mel Gibson. Michael Winner. Buddy Adler. John Lasseter.

Over ten weeks, we covered: early film; Classical Hollywood; French New Wave; British heritage cinema; the avant-garde; stardom; sitcom and television drama; documentary; and Netflix. We used posters, advertisements, toys, merchandise, the daily press, photographs, music videos and press releases, among other materials, to understand the industrial, aesthetic and political contexts of film and television. We discussed feminism, misogyny, #MeToo, racism, white supremacy, queer histories, transphobia, and the natures of history, historiography and power. We questioned our privilege. And at the end of it, student engagement with the course had improved and a record number of them got As.

All on a course taught using women-led screen media.

It's almost as though men aren't imperative to our understanding and enjoying cinema. It's almost (whisper it...) as though we don't need abusive men for the cinematic arts to thrive.

Of course, not everyone has been positive about my decision not to screen films and shows made by men. Maybe it would have helped if I'd gotten on with it quietly and not made a fuss. After all, when I began teaching the course, my approach differed slightly from other lecturers who centralise women's media in that I discussed the idea audibly and visually in public forums. This was based on both my well-trained-female need to ask for permission and seek approval (I asked senior male colleagues if my teaching practice was okay) and out of curiosity (I asked if anyone had done this

before in an online space for academic women to discover what successes and challenges they had faced). I also decided to be open with students about my curation practices. To walk into a room filled with the next generation of film and television makers, critics, distributors, broadcasters, exhibitors and educators and *not* talk openly about abuse in the wake of #MeToo felt like a missed opportunity at best, and irresponsible at worst.

Louis B Mayer. Lars von Trier. Bill Cosby. Ingmar Bergman.

For ethical reasons, I'm not going to identify whether the following comments were from men or women, or in person or online. Nor am I going to give direct quotes. Nevertheless, here's a summary of the more negative feedback:

I was told to stop drawing attention to myself. I was told to just be quiet about it or risk a backlash. I was told that I was re-inscribing gender binaries and that people would see straight through me. I was told I was ramming my far-left agenda down people's throats. I was told I didn't allow space for opposing views. I was told it was not appropriate. I was told I shouldn't be political in the classroom. I was told I shouldn't be allowed to teach. I was told, despite explicitly stating the course would include women of colour and trans women, that focusing on women's film and TV history would promote white feminism and transphobia. I guess if there's anything to be said for teaching men's film and TV history it's that you can't be accused of promoting the wrong kind of feminism, right?

Some people also pointed out (and thanks for this, I really love having to rehash this argument) that the work is not the person; the art is not the artist. Come on. That's like arguing a battery-farmed egg isn't the same as the abuse of chickens; that it isn't the same as an exploitative and violent farming industry; that it's ethical to eat the egg because it isn't the person who made the money from locking up the hens and telling them to lay.

James Toback. Marlon Brando. Christian Bale. Kevin Costner.

We inscribe our names on all of our creations: on paintings, on book covers, in the opening credits of films. We write about 'I' and 'my'. Art is not free of the conditions of its production just because the conditions make us feel guilty about our consumption. If women got raped, assaulted and abused during the making of your favourite film that doesn't necessarily diminish the movie's potential for entertainment. But we should sure as hell be questioning the ethics of our enjoyment.

(Full disclosure: I eat free-range eggs even though I'm vegetarian and I know they kill all the male chickens unnecessarily. I saw *Pulp Fiction* on TV recently. I paid to see Ingmar Bergman's *Persona* at the cinema a couple of months ago. Once upon a time I even thought that Lars von Trier was an interesting filmmaker. I am complicated and flawed. I can try harder, too).

Some teachers and exhibitors also say that we should continue to teach Hitchcock, Weinstein, von Trier – and problematize them. They fear that by excluding them from our canon we lose too much of our cinematic and televisual history. I'm by no means suggesting that all cinemas and all courses on all degree programmes eradicate all men. Heaven forbid. Indeed, the alleged and proven abusers, harassers, assaulters and rapists whose names appear in this article (all named as such in the mainstream press) have well over 4000 producer, director, writer and actor credits between them. That's a staggering number.

But that's a whole lot of problematizing to be doing. That's a whole lot of energy expended telling your students or viewers about how awful that man is or was when what you really want to discuss is *mise-en-scène*, or the horror genre, or sound design. And that's also a staggering disregard for audiences that will have first-hand experience of abuse and who may not want to hear the words 'problematic, critical, rape, abuse, violent, assault, allegation, denial, nevertheless, genius, artist, brilliant' every time they watch a film.

Sean Connery. Rob Lowe. Jared Leto. Nate Parker.

On the one hand, we denounce the film industry for failing to act, and on the other, we continue to circulate and legitimise the work of abusive men in academic and exhibition spaces, as if they are not all connected. We continue to review their work and to heap praise on it. We continue to look for the quality mark that assures us 'no animals were harmed in the making of this film' while we give zero fucks, no consideration, no fucking care *at all* to all the people (mostly women) that were harmed and traumatised and scarred by the means of that film's production.

As the survivors of abuse, we are less than animals. We may as well be puppets, or CGI, or invisible. Look at us. **Look at us and learn to care.**

We also, as teachers and mentors, fail to recognise, somehow, that the people we are teaching in our classrooms today are the industry professionals of tomorrow. The film and TV history module I studied as an undergraduate was dominated by more than twenty white male directors, with women's work featured only a couple of times as short and experimental cinema. I am 32. The course was delivered in 2005. My peers now run film festivals, are marketing and acquisitions managers for major studios, are producers and directors. Are we really surprised that the industry hasn't magically transformed into an inclusive and diverse environment in the last thirteen years when this is what its creative talent were taught film and television looked like? I guess soon enough we'll be talking about 2005 as a dark post-feminist time when men just didn't know any better and no one knew what equality looked like. Yeah, right.

Charlie Sheen. Johnny Depp. Quentin Tarantino. Woody Allen.

Actually, aren't you sick of these interruptions? I am. These men's names, prioritised at the beginning of my article and inserted into my writing on women in film and television. These men's names, taking up space and demanding attention. These men's names reminding us over and over and over again of abuses and violence against women—people—in the film industry. Do we need any more of those reminders? Really? I don't. Fuck those men and fuck their canon and fuck their entitlement and privilege. It's time to change the narrative.

Lupita N'yongo. Amber Tamblyn. Joan Crawford. Marilyn Monroe.

Just think of all the women I could have included in this paper, all the names I haven't said. All the women who made films, make films, didn't get to make films, named the men, withstood the shame, thought we supported them, thought they were making change... only for us to forget, to keep screening the abusive men, to remember only when the women stand up and say, 'Harvey Weinstein raped me', again.

Ava DuVernay. Jane Campion. Beeban Kidron. Mira Nair.

Since we're changing the narrative now, what of all the good things that came out of making the conversation about women? Sure, I've been teaching since 2011 and I've never had such personal and upsetting criticisms of my teaching before. But my decision to centralise women's work was never about making friends. It was about speaking to that one woman in the room who couldn't understand why she had to keep watching films by rapists; it was about the woman who lacked the confidence to say what she thought in class; it was about the women who needed to know that they had a place in screen history, and that time really *is* up and things are going to change for them. It was about empowering *all* of my students to do things differently in future. And, if I'm honest, it was about me, too. In the age of 'student-centred learning' I'm willing to argue that even in the classroom, as a lecturer, I matter. My feelings and ideas and ethics are valuable.

Judy Garland. Helen Mirren. Reese Witherspoon. Kristen Stewart.

And, for all the negatives, I have never had so many positive responses. These are far too personal to share in any detail but related to issues of visibility, sexuality, creativity (one student was inspired to make her first film!) and while predominantly from women, were also voiced by men. The announcement that the course would feature women directors was cheered. Most lectures were met with a round of applause from women students keen to make their approval known to their peers. In the classroom, women spoke *all the time*. The gender politics of discussions were transformed and inverted. I want all women students, all women cinema goers, all women, everywhere, to have this experience and to know the possibility of their lives being centred. I want them all to have a cinema that they feel is for them.

Lois Weber. Julie Dash. Mabel Normand. Dorothy Arzner.

Now, we need to keep having this conversation and being faced with difficult and unpleasant truths, because while time might visibly be up in the film industry, many women have not yet had their day of reckoning. As the #TimesUpAcademia hashtag has proved, there are hundreds of male scholars still working in our universities and giving lectures in our classrooms who have no right to be there. Many of us have our own stories to tell about abusive male scholars. What are we going to do with their work? At Goldsmiths, and now elsewhere, women write in library books: This man is known to have abused women. Do not cite him.

When women are in the wrong, they are no longer cited. In an earlier version of this article, I quoted Asia Argento, who was raped by Weinstein. She has since settled a sexual harassment claim out of court and has subsequently become a problem figure within the #MeToo movement. I chose not to prioritise her words as a result. Rose McGowan's transphobia, meanwhile, makes her an unsuitable spokesperson for an intersectional feminism that must account for and represent *all* women experiencing sexual violence and its aftermath. Then there is Judith Butler, a scholar famed for her feminist philosophy, who revealed that she does not put her theory into practice when she supported a woman scholar who sexually harassed a male student.

We must acknowledge that women get things wrong, too. But women's work is rarely privileged in people's citations, even when the women don't rape anyone. And let's not forget that most perpetrators of sexual violence are men and that this is a problem of patriarchy.

Muriel Box. Carrie Fisher. Lana Wachowski. Sally Potter.

Of course, there are many people already running brilliant initiatives to counter the insidious effects of patriarchal culture—whether loudly or by stealth—to make space for women, people of colour, non-binary, queer and disabled filmmakers, scholars, creatives. But we need to do more. We cannot stop now. Because the problem of men's systematic abuses of power is pervasive and it's not going away.

So how do you solve a problem like von Trier?

My answer is to make difficult choices. Not choices open to everyone—film criticism, exhibition and academia are all rigged games and I'm not in as precarious a position as that occupied by so many of my women colleagues—but choices many of us can and do make. We can choose not to screen, not to cite, not to endlessly 'problematise' when we have so much of women's history and work still to explore.

Agnes Varda. Vera Chytilová. Amy Heckerling. Octavia Spencer.

So fuck their canon. Because men haven't hesitated to fuck us, to diminish our work and screw it up. And it's not like they asked our permission. It's time, if time really is up, that we countered their privilege. It's time for us to create new histories. And in the words of Lupita Nyong'o, it's time for us to speak up 'to make certain that this is not the kind of misconduct that deserves a second chance.' Why don't we give women a chance, instead? Perhaps the time has come to do something radical: to stop prioritising *me too* for once. Not me too, but instead insisting that we should put us first.













